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ABSTRACT

An essential part of establishing Project LEM (Learning Experience Module), a program designed for multiage groupings in open-space schools, was the development of a multifaceted informational approach to help assure that facts replaced rumors and enthusiasm replaced parental anxiety. The LEM staff believes that good public relations call for parents neither being "sold" nor merely kept informed but, rather, for parents to participate in helping to develop the program and the climate for improved learning. Thus, the goal for Project LEM became the total commitment to community involvement on the part of the Project Director and every staff member. This commitment found expression in a citizen advisory council, mini-teas, parent workshops, individual parent-teacher conferences, home visitations, open houses, class visitations, and an open door policy. (Author/IRT)

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Project LEM

Home-School Interaction

EA 007 036

INTRODUCTION

The educational plan known as Project LEM, Learning Experience Module, is described in general terms as an educational program designed for multi-age groupings in open-space schools. It is, in effect, an ongoing process which responds to the needs of the pupils involved - academically and socially.

There are many factors which contribute to the success of this plan, one of which is the harmonious efforts of staff, students and parents who realize congruent objectives and strive to reach them.

Findings of an analysis conducted by Teachers College, Columbia University, for the Hackensack Board of Education in the mid 1960's identified the need for parent support by stating: "... when trying to change an educational approach, even an approach designed to improve the academic and social achievement of pupils, the school is almost helpless without the cooperation and assistance of parents."

The dissemination plan of this Title III project has included publishing brochures which delineate varied components described in "Overview and Evaluation," "Environment and Space Utilization," and "Organization and Curriculum." However, specifics related to the important question, "How does a school get the parents and the community to accept and support these changes?" has not been previously detailed. This folder describes how Project LEM approached the crucial area of parent involvement.

THE NEED TO COMMUNICATE ... COMMUNICATING NEEDS

For two years before Project LEM ever became a reality, monthly parent meetings called "Cracker Barrel Sessions" were conducted by members of the staff of Hillers School. During these meetings the concerns and aspirations of parents related to the school's program and environment were discussed. Suggestions presented at these meetings were reviewed by the school staff, subsequently ranked on a priority basis by the Advisory Council and the project staff, and incorporated into the basic planning for Project LEM.

Change, especially change to an innovative educational program, is rarely embraced enthusiastically and never automatically. New programs succeed only with parental acceptance and community involvement. Project LEM was no exception. The LEM staff continues to concern itself as much as possible in involving parents and helping them develop pride in the program in which their children are participating. However, in the beginning, many parents were confused as to what LEM was all about. Some parents thought it was just for gifted students and therefore would take affront if their children were not included. Others thought LEM was for students having limited success and didn't want their children included. Many expressed concern that pupils wouldn't learn the 3 R's, instead, would only experiment with "all that new fangled stuff."

An essential part of establishing Project LEM was the development of a multi-faceted informational approach to help assure that facts replaced rumors, and enthusiasm replaced parental anxiety. The LEM staff believes that good public relations calls for parents neither being "sold" nor merely kept informed, but rather, for getting them to participate in helping to develop the program and climate for improved learning. Thus the goal for Project LEM became no less than the total commitment to community involvement on the part of the Project Director and every staff member.

Here are a few examples of how this commitment took concrete shape:

- Upon approval of its preliminary proposal as a Title III program, a Citizens Advisory Council was established. This became a two-way avenue of communication between the school and the parents in the community. How the composition of the 15-member council was determined is illustrated below.
- Planned home-school programs, such as a series of reading workshops for parents, were designed to engender the involvement of parents in their children's learning and thereby increase communications with the school.

The question most frequently asked: How do you get parents to accept and support educational changes?

- A "talent bank" of community volunteers was developed to provide resources for the teachers to use in enriching the program and to give parents a greater role in activities both inside and outside the classroom.
- A personalized Home Visitation plan was initiated by the staff. The plan was designed to enable parents to discuss the issues of concern and to become better acquainted with the LEM staff and the LEM philosophy. The Team Leader would maintain a record of home contacts and attempt to schedule a home visit by one of the staff teachers - usually the pupil's reading teacher - to the home of any family that expressed interest and concern in the project.
- Further encouragement was offered parents to visit the school not only during conference time but also to see the program in action.
- In general, the "open door" of Hillers School opened wider.

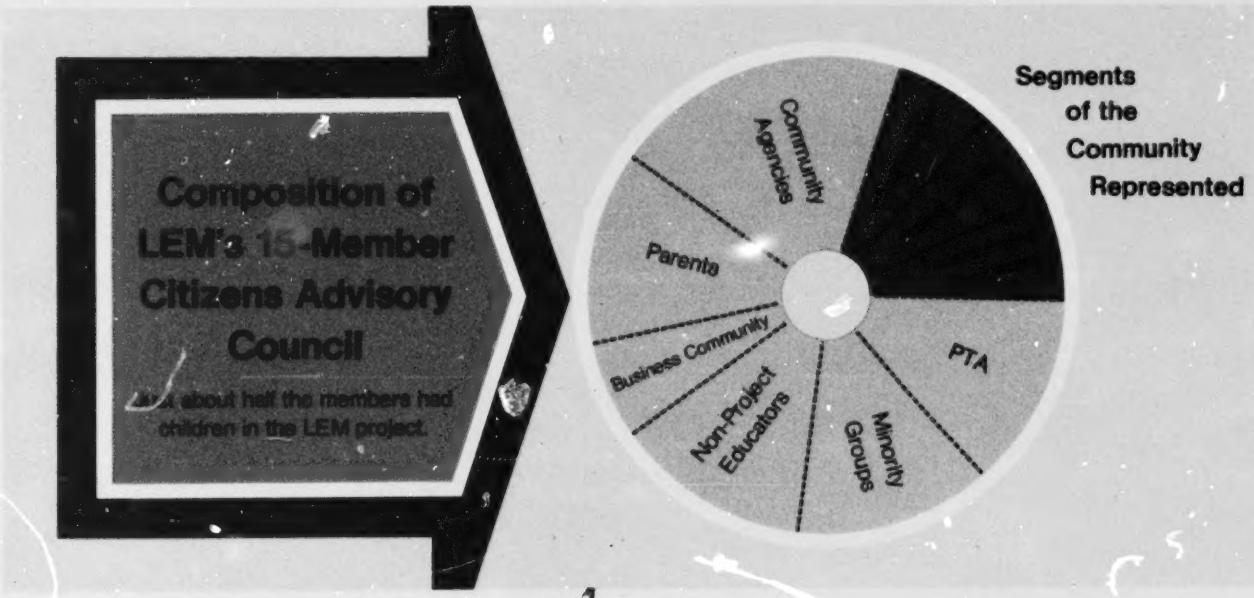
CITIZENS ADVISORY COUNCIL

The council was formed to play a major role in the development of good school-community relationships assisting in the overall objectives of parent involvement and program dissemination.

At the time of LEM I, the decision was to have one council member for every ten pupils in the project. This resulted in a CAC of twelve citizens, plus the School Principal, the Project Director, and the Federal Projects Coordinator. These three school officials selected the council members with the advice of the Hillers School staff. Although each year the student population of LEM increased, the size of the CAC remained the same. (The CAC has since been incorporated into the P.T.A. as a subcommittee.)

Members were chosen with an eye toward getting a real cross section of opinion relative to a change in education and also representation from all segments of the community: teachers and non-teachers, professionals and non-professionals, hourly workers and housewives, and all racial and ethnic groups. About half were parents with children in the LEM program. Some were very conservative in their approach to education and to change. Not all were favorable to LEM, at least, not in the beginning. As Mrs. Joan Tetens, one of the council members, observed:

> "....the result has been a very strong Advisory Council... people who take their task of advising seriously and have no fear about opening their mouths ... because they know they're listened to. Too often, in an undertaking such as an innovative educational program, there's a tendency 'to stack the deck' and parents have a way of telling when this happens."



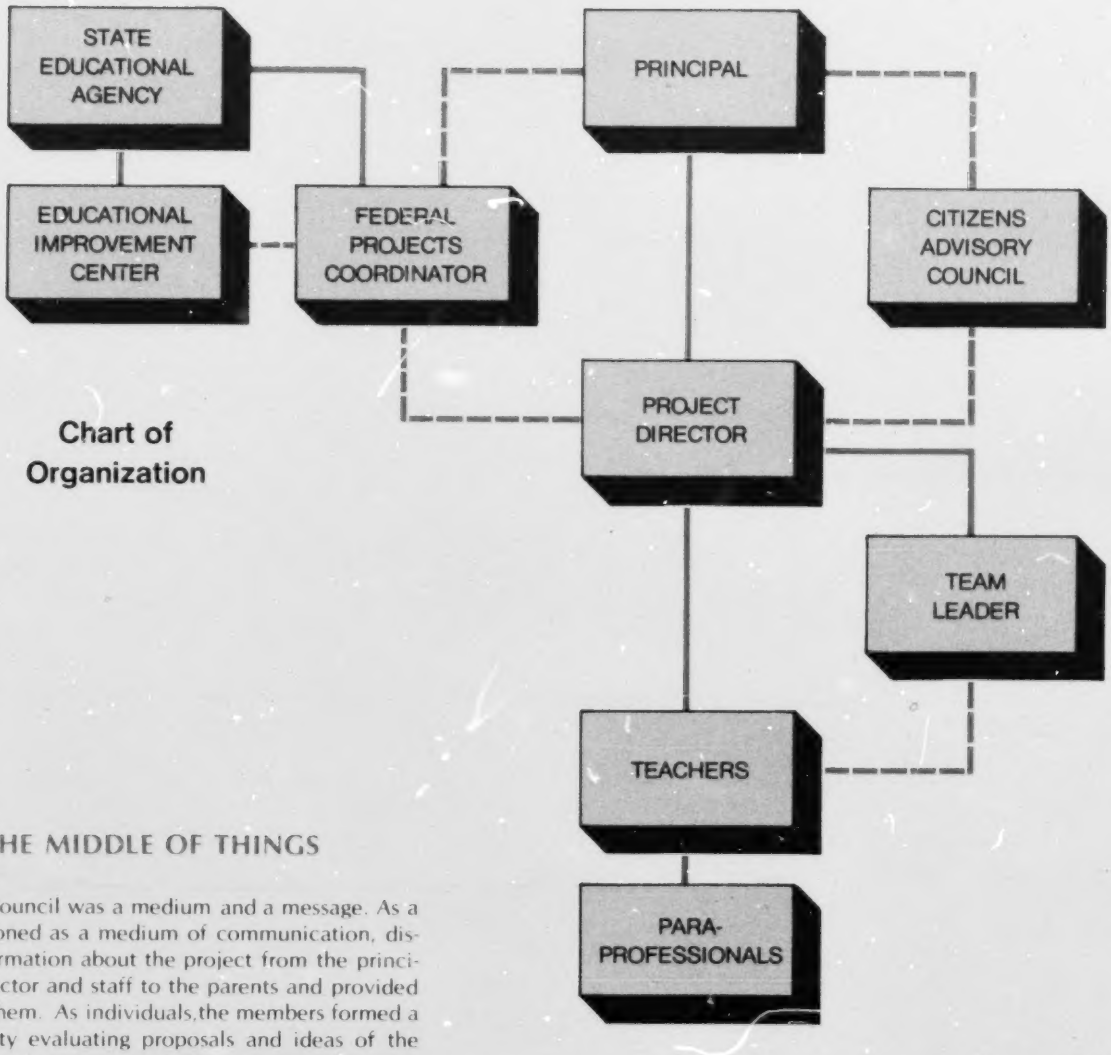


Chart of Organization

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THINGS

In a sense the Council was a medium and a message. As a group, it functioned as a medium of communication, disseminating information about the project from the principal, project director and staff to the parents and provided feedback from them. As individuals,the members formed a micro-community evaluating proposals and ideas of the school officials. Their message took the form of advice, suggestions and criticism.

The major functions of the Citizens Advisory may be summarized along these lines:

1) To act as a sounding board for ideas and respond as a group of parents representative of the community as a whole.

2) To help disseminate information about Project LEM to parents and the general community and to help gain their acceptance.

3) To make personal parent contacts encouraging attendance at orientation and follow-up meetings; to be on hand to greet the parents; and to gain instant feedback about their real concerns.

4) To become identified with Project LEM so that parents in the community, perhaps reluctant to approach a teacher or school official directly, might feel comfortable asking them any question about the program.

5) To augment the manpower of the Project LEM staff by establishing sub-committees who serve as guides for visiting groups to the project, in planning publicity, and in developing dissemination material.

"Too often ... there's a tendency to 'stack the deck' ... and parents have a way of telling when this happens."

PARENT ATTITUDES ... AND ORIENTATION

The orientation program for parents that began with and helped launch LEM I successfully has been implemented each year and remains the general pattern. There are three orientation meetings for parents of LEM participants during the year.

1) The first takes place in June - designed for parents of all new students to LEM for the coming year. The purpose is to acquaint parents with the objectives of the program and its organizational design and to describe the needs assessment and behavioral objectives addressed by the program.

Prior to this June meeting, the parents' names were divided among ten Council members who then personally contacted them. During the evening of the meeting the parents sit with their respective CAC representative and, joined by a LEM staffer, participate in a small group discussion for the exchange of ideas. To measure their knowledge of the program and awareness of its intent, parents were asked to complete the Parent Survey Questionnaire.

2) The second orientation meeting took place in October. Again, the personal contact approach. Here the CAC members teamed with the LEM staff to serve as guides in showing parents the physical facilities of LEM. At this meeting students demonstrated the use of selected equipment and materials and displayed the way in which students and teachers work together to make learning experiences more rewarding.

In addition to a standing open invitation, parents, CAC members, local administrators, and representatives of community agencies are invited to see the LEM "in action" during the day, watching the youngsters in hands-on activities. Observing pupils in a culminating activity related to the core curriculum of the LEM has proven to be a most valuable experience for parents.

3) The final orientation meeting took place in early Spring. It usually involved a film or slide presentation ... a review of objectives and "progress report" for the year ... and small group discussions lead by the LEM staff and the CAC. Attending parents were asked to fill out a duplicate Parent Survey Questionnaire so that a comparison of responses could be tabulated and analyzed.

MEETINGS ... A MUST

Throughout the year other types of meetings were scheduled for parents to become better acquainted with the LEM staff ... to keep abreast of their children's progress in the program ... to learn how they can help in maintaining a supportive learning atmosphere in their homes.

Mini-Teas: These were brief daytime meetings held on a scheduled basis so that each new parent might attend at least once during the year. Their particular value is that they enabled a parent - in one visit - to meet all four or five teachers in her child's LEM and to do so in an informal manner and on a small group basis.

Parent Workshops: Designed by the LEM staff, these were provided to equip parents toward becoming more successful in the role they play in their children's education. These workshops were planned for specific purposes:

FOR EXAMPLE: Parents of children, who the LEM staff felt would benefit from more experience in a specific skill, such as phonetics, were invited to a series of workshops and given training to help them help their children in meeting a specific objective. At such workshops, conducted by the Project Director or the Team Leader, parents were offered suggestions and provided with specific materials and equipment they could use in the home.

FOR EXAMPLE: Another group of workshops was held for parents of youngsters who excelled in a certain area, such as, creative writing. Here the LEM staff shared specific materials and techniques which parents might find valuable for use with youngsters at home. This approach helped carry the young student's interest beyond the classroom.

Individual Parent-Teacher Conferences: Basically a form of progress reporting, these conferences were scheduled twice a year by the pupil's Reading Teacher who made provisions for other teachers to join the discussion whenever it was requested or deemed advisable. In the eyes of both parents and teachers, this was probably the single most important type of meeting because it represented the best opportunity for both to learn in-depth about the individual

Why ignore your "talent bank" of citizens for helping to enrich units of study?

child's performance, feelings and needs. If the occasion arose, a conference was called on the basis of a problem-solving need. Such a conference was scheduled and conducted by the respective LEM team teacher who sensed the concern.

Home Visitation: A popular innovation in the LEM approach was the program whereby each year one-fourth of the project parents were visited in their homes by the LEM teachers. This increased the staff's rapport with parents and helped provide additional insights into the needs of the children. Parents' reactions were consistently favorable to this procedure and especially expressed appreciation for the personal time so expended by the LEM staff.

Forms were sent to all parents and a schedule arranged for those requesting a visit. The procedure was designed so that one-quarter of the families would be visited each year, permitting all the homes to have been visited once during LEM involvement.

To help assure successful home visitation experiences, the staff conducted inservice training with a social worker prior to starting the visits. Teachers were also made aware of homes that were experiencing serious problems and judgment used to determine if a visit would be advisable. In all cases, the home visit replaced one of the two teacher-parent conferences normally scheduled throughout the year.

Open House: LEM began on a small scale. The first LEM involved only 125 students, or approximately one-fifth of the school's enrollment. In an effort to keep non-LEM parents advised of the program an Open House meeting was held twice a year to which all school parents were invited and at which the progress and results of the LEM program were discussed. This increased parental support which proved valuable when the project, itself, was to become part and parcel of the regular Hillers School program.

INVOLVING THE COMMUNITY

Just as the home visitation program reflected a visible going out to the community on the part of the LEM staff, attempts were made to effect a coming into the school on the part of parents and interested citizens. Some of these include:

Open Door Policy: "The school and the LEM areas are always open. Anytime you want to observe - you just come. It's your school." Those simple phrases sum up the attitude of Bernard P. Kaminsky, Principal of Fanny M. Hillers School, and he speaks them at every opportunity. Formality in no way proved a barrier whenever a parent wanted to see the LEM "in action."

Class Visitations: The informal, open space environment of the LEM is particularly conducive to parent visitation. The ongoing Learning Centers and the group work approach are not interfered with or interrupted by such visits. Parents can observe comfortably and not feel intrusive. Learning activities continue as usual.

Community Resource Directory: To be in a position to tap the resources of the community, the school used a questionnaire to learn the occupations, hobbies, interests, and availability of its parents. The school then had a way of drawing from a "talent bank" of its citizens to augment the expertise of its staff, depending upon the need, and thereby enrich units of study.

As a direct result, there were many examples where parents volunteered to work with pupils in home art classes, cooking, sewing, and woodworking projects. Other parents came to school and worked with the children on creative writing and hobbies.

A PUBLIC FACE ... A PERSONAL TOUCH

One of the basic educational aims of Project LEM has been to have each pupil develop a positive self-image. It would be inconsistent with this stated aim, if the project's "public face" did not reflect this same attitude. That's why the school administrator and the LEM staff took the little extra planning necessary to convey a personal touch whenever possible. Here are just a few examples:

How to say "Welcome": At registration time, when enrolling their children for LEM, parents were given folders describing the program and offered a tour of the facilities. Then, in July, the individual child received a personal note

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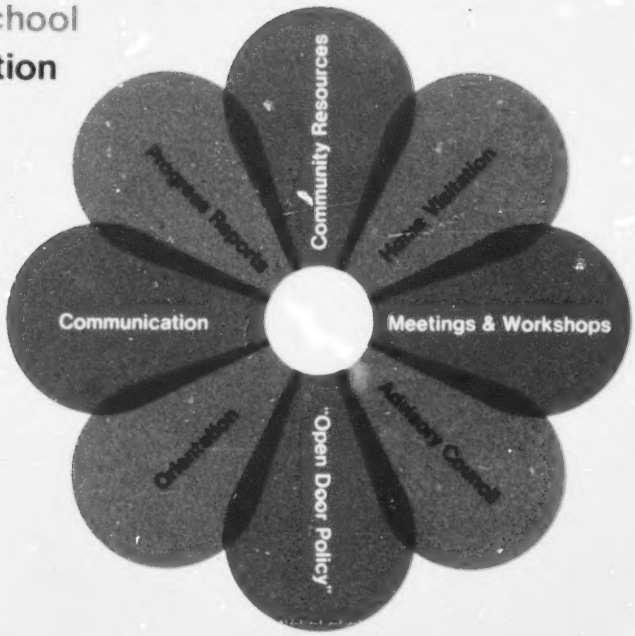

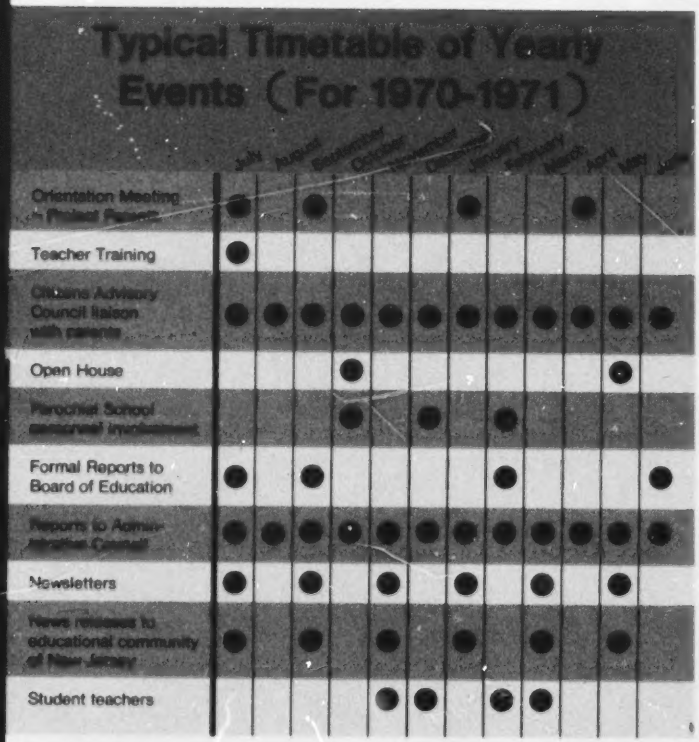
Typical Timetable of Yearly Events (For 1970-1971)
Orientation Meeting
Teacher Training
Citizens Advisory Council liaison with parents
Open House
Parochial School personnel involvement
Formal Reports to Board of Education
Reports to Administrative Council
Newsletters
News releases to educational community of New Jersey
Student teachers

of welcome from his or her home base teacher-to-be.

Don't wait - Telephone: When was the last time you saw a classroom that had a telephone? Well, there's one in each of the LEM areas. The phone is symptomatic of the desire for open communication between the staff and the parents. Open-ended. Personal. Immediate. When the occasion presents itself, the phone call can enhance a child's learning experience or can minimize a situation that, if delayed, could become magnified out of proportion.

"Report"...ing Pupil Progress: Rather than grades, LEM makes use of a form called a Pupil Evaluation. It combines a checklist and a narrative approach. It is used as a tool of communication ... between the teacher and the pupil ... pupil and parent ... parents and teacher. The youngster brings it home to his parents twice a year, a message that shows his progress in a personalized, non-ranking manner. Rather than being issued to the entire class on a given day, it is given to the pupil individually, or at most, to a small group of pupils at any one time.

INVOLVEMENT LEADS TO CONVICTION

During the first year of the project, one hundred of the 122 families with children in the program attended at least one meeting. In subsequent years the involvement of parents continued to exceed expectations.

Initially, parents were generally apprehensive about the hugh classroom size; but now favor it as they have seen how the flexible use of space has enhanced the school's effort to provide individualized education for their children. As one parent put it: "When I went to school, you saw the head of the child in front of you. Today, in LEM, watching them sit around small tables, for instance, you know it's all different."

Sharing materials, inherent in team-teaching, results in greater efficiency rather than in larger budget requests.

One mother, who has four youngsters in LEM summed up her feelings this way: "I'm delighted. With LEM there's a lot more going on than in the one-teacher classroom. It's a more solid experience for the youngsters."

"The teachers have been excellent," commented another mother, "both in working with the children - and - in their efforts to keep parents informed, especially if anything needs attention.

"What might have bothered us as adults - the noise and the number of different activities all going on at the same time - actually has benefitted the children. Of that I'm convinced."

REPLICATION COSTS

Project LEM has proven that it costs less to modernize an area and put a corridor to use than it does to rent or purchase temporary classrooms. It has demonstrated how such remodeling can also result in accomodating 25% more pupils in the same space by using the total area for instructional purposes. But what is of prime consideration is reflected in the educational program operating within that space which is fostered by the LEM staffing pattern and team-teaching approach. The following is a brief description of the replication costs involved.

Staff Training: The cost of replicating the LEM approach is basically that of staff training. Minimum recommendation would be a week of training for the staff during the summer, plus a week of planning for implementing the changeover. Presently a summer training program conducted by LEM staff members is available without charge to outside school districts. However, provisions must be made by the Consumer Districts for salaries and expenses of their participating staff for that week, as well as a commitment to provide continuing help, encouragement and support for their staff.

Adoption of the LEM staffing pattern does not have to result in any addition to the school's professional teaching staff. As explained in the folder "LEM: Organization and Curriculum," the approach might be reassignment of staff rather than an increase in numbers. However, for a school's budgeting purposes, the inclusion of paraprofessionals should be anticipated. After the initial costs for staff training, the ongoing costs of the program should not require an increase in current operating expenses.

Equipping: Implementing the LEM approach does not necessarily entail unusual expenses in the purchase of equipment. Rather, it calls for a redistribution of existing materials, texts, and hardware. The type of furniture could change, but basically it's the sharing of a variety of materials rather than solely purchasing new materials that prevails. And it is just this sharing, inherent in the LEM team-teaching approach, that results in greater efficiency rather than in larger budget requests.

Remodeling: For a school planning to adapt the LEM program, the cost for facilities modification would vary widely depending on existing local conditions and scope of change. However, LEM I might well serve to illustrate renovation cost estimates.

In designing LEM I four existing classrooms and an adjoining corridor in one wing of the school, previously accomodating 100 students, were converted into an open-plan learning center accomodating 125 students. Remodeling included removal of curtain walls, painting, construction of a small stage at one end of the corridor, installation of acoustical ceiling, carpeting, electrical outlets, blackboards and shelving. The cost in 1970 was approximately $8,000.

Each of the four LEM areas reflects a different architectural pattern; but when remodeled, each has met the goal of increased use of space as compared to its former traditional classroom design. Here again, after the initial investment, continuing costs need not exceed those of current school programs.

Project LEM, Learning Experience Module
Hackensack, New Jersey

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